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THE CONVENTIONS OF DETECTIVE FICTION, OR WHY WE LIKE DETECTIVE NOVELS: *HERCULE POIROT'S CHRISTMAS*

Abstract

Detective fiction has been immensely popular among readers for decades. This paper answers the questions of who the readers of this genre are and what makes detective stories so attractive for them. The first part of the paper discusses why the so-called contemplatives are especially fond of detective fiction, which is often read as escapist literature, as well as why detective fiction is especially popular in Anglo-Saxon countries. In the second part of the paper, Agatha Christie's novel *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* is used as an example of organized structure and established conventions of detective fiction that make the genre appealing, which includes the setting, characterization, crime, detective, and restored order, i.e. a happy ending.

Keywords: Detective fiction, conventions, Agatha Christie, *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*

Introduction – Detective Fiction

Detective fiction belongs to popular literature, which means that it is written for large audiences, so it is easily readable and does not deal with abstract issues. In the 1960s, the boundaries between "high" and "low" literature began to disappear, and since then, this genre has been analyzed in many studies because of its significance for readers (Priestman 1). Detective fiction is a "type of popular literature in which a crime is introduced and investigated and the culprit is revealed" ("Detective Story"). Generally, it provides the readers with "the mild intellectual challenge of a puzzle, excitement, [and] confirmation of our cherished beliefs in goodness and order" (James 6). Its beginnings are to be found in the nineteenth century, namely, in E.A. Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," which set the first conventions of the genre. Detective fiction was later popularized by Arthur Conan Doyle's famous stories, whose main protagonist was Sherlock Holmes. Doyle heavily influenced the authors who published detective stories between the two world wars, a period called the Golden Age of Detective Fiction due to the remarkable flourishing of this genre. During that time, one of the greatest crime fiction authors – Agatha Christie – was particularly active. She is the most-translated author in the world (*UNESCO: Index Translationum*), and the sale of her books has been enormous. According to Campbell, Christie was the third most popular author in 1959, right after the Bible and Shakespeare (18). Still misleading the readers with her ingenious plots, Christie is even today one of the most read authors of detective fiction. The first part of this paper discusses the attractiveness of the Golden Age detective fiction, and the second part analyses its conventions that appeal to the readers based on *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, a novel that definitely belongs among Christie's most brilliant stories. The novel portrays the murder of old Simeon Lee, an immoral and vicious person. He had many potential enemies in his family, which gathered in his home for Christmas, so it seems practically impossible to identify his murderer. However, Hercule Poirot uses his little grey cells to solve the mystery successfully.

1. Who Likes Detective Fiction?

Despite the popularity of detective fiction, not everybody is a fan, so let me start by analyzing the kind of readers who like this genre, especially the novels written in the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. Pavličić argues that a person either has or does not have the affinity for detective fiction (5), while Auden sug-

gests that the people who are "immune" to other forms of popular literature enjoy detective fiction (qtd. in James 52). According to Pavličić, the manner in which people who like this genre experience the world is similar to the way detective fiction functions; they, namely, see it as a puzzle in which there is "a difference between the illusion and the real truth" and discovering the truth excites them (6–7, translation mine). Cawelti explains that the search for secrets as an intellectual activity (deducing on the basis of clues) and the conviction that "all problems have a clear and rational solution" are interesting to those who, due to their background and education, have predispositions to appreciate the process of thinking (43). Pavličić classifies them as contemplatives who must double-check everything and who consider the truth so important and valuable that they make an effort to find it both in life and in literature (7–8). This is a very optimistic view because those people believe that the world is a rational and meaningful place, whose hidden meaning we should discover (Pavličić 8). Since such an approach is characteristic of detective fiction, contemplatives are fond of this genre.

Moreover, Pavličić suggests that detective fiction is the opposite of romance novels; he, namely, claims that detective stories are read by men and romance novels by women because they reflect the male and female worldview, respectively (173). In other words, detective fiction is realistic regarding the worldview and idealistic in respect of changing the world, while romance novels are idealistic regarding the possibility of happiness and realistic as far as its realization is concerned, and these views are comparable to the male and female worldview, respectively (Pavličić 173). This perception, although fairly stereotypical, is often true, but the fact remains that some of the most famous detective story authors, such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, were women, and many women would rather read detective fiction than romance novels, including the author of this article. To modify Pavličić's theory, the answer may lie in people's temperaments: the readers who are thinkers, perfectionists, detail-oriented, and logical people who like rules and structure and dislike sentimentality are more likely to read detective stories, while romantic and emotional readers who are focused on relationships with other people tend to like romance novels.

Pavličić further observes that this genre is the only adult literary genre that children like to read. Since they have not developed an awareness of art yet, "they do not let themselves be bothered and skip descriptions" (47–8, translation mine) in other genres, but not in detective fiction because they know that descriptions are important for the plot and for finding out who the perpetrator

is. Pavličić identifies this fact as the reason why the best children's books are in fact detective stories, such as *Tom Sawyer* or *Emil and the Detectives* (48).

As far as the society is concerned, trivial literature is read predominantly in the societies that "seek the stabilization of their vision based on their social structure," which is true for lower middle classes and totalitarian systems (Škreb 194, translation mine). Pavličić considers detective stories "a political barometer" because declaring them to be decadent or harmful implies the strict state policies that will also meddle in other matters. Consequently, when citizens gain more freedom after such kind of politics, detective fiction is the first genre that is published, which means that "the detective novel is the first violet of every political spring" (Pavličić 126, translation mine).

According to James, the detective story provides "a reassuring relief from the tensions and responsibilities of daily life," and its popularity is at its highest in the most difficult times, "when society can be faced with problems which no money, political theories or good intentions seem able to solve or alleviate" (53) – for example, after the First World War, when the Golden Age of Detective Fiction took place. Since in detective stories good triumphs over evil and, as James explains, a problem is solved "by human ingenuity, human intelligence and human courage," reading detective fiction alleviates our worries by affirming our belief that we live in a deeply moral and benevolent world (53). In other words, detective fiction can be regarded as escapist literature.

Cawelti argues that by reading detective fiction, the readers get immersed in "moral fantasies," which Pyrhönen explains as "escapist ideal worlds" in which the readers can experience "a wide range of emotions without the insecurity and complications accompanying such emotions in reality" (Pyrhönen 47). Although escapism is despised as a way of life, the human ability to use imagination in order to create new worlds into which we can temporarily withdraw is a valuable human feature (Cawelti 13). Cawelti indicates two psychological needs for literary escapism: on the one hand, the escape from the boredom of a safe, routine everyday life through excitement and interest, and on the other hand, the escape from the awareness of the uncertainties that hurt us (death, love failure, the inability to achieve our goals, etc.) (15–6). Harry Berger describes these two contradictory impulses as follows: a human being has two primal needs: the first one is "a need for order, peace, and security, . . . for a familiar and predictable world," and the second, opposite impulse represents a need for anxiety and un-

certainty, confusion, risk, tension, danger, novelty, mystery, and enemies (qtd. in Cawelti 16). Cawelti believes that "the experience of escape and the source of its ability to relax and please us is . . . that it temporarily synthesizes these two needs and resolves this tension" (16). He deduces that this could be responsible for the paradox of popular literature, whose defining characteristic is a conventional structure interwoven with the images of danger, uncertainty, and violence (16).

Odden claims that adults are like children in respect of feelings because we escape to a fantasy world when faced with stress and reenact our childhood dramas that have not been acted out the way we wanted "in order to recover our belief in the fantasies *before they were destroyed*" (132). An example of the drama Odden talks about is learning to trust the world as a safe place. Children deal with such dramas mostly until the age of twelve, when they reread or read book series, which have similar features like popular literature (Odden 130–31). For example, when parents read to their children, they are intimately connected, physically and intellectually, because children, while being on the parent's lap, "cuddled into one figure," experience the same story as their parent, and this "symbiotic dyad" embodies ultimate security and love. In popular literature, we recreate this parent-child identification through the identification with fictional characters (Odden 136). Furthermore, the "symbiotic relationship" with the protagonist of the book is over when the reader reaches the end of the book, but it continues when we start reading another book with the same or similar hero, so "the drama of learning to control separation anxiety" is thus recreated (Odden 139). Besides, characters who are easy to identify with are in the center of action in popular literature, so these stories enable the readers to simply exist at the center of attention, which is what people under stress need since they become more egocentric in these situations (Odden 140–41). To put it differently, the world of popular literature is a predictive world in which we know who is good and who is bad. Thus, this world is less frightening for us (Odden 145), and in it, "we are always loved, secure, important, powerful, and happy" (Odden 149). Odden deduces that the adults who have overcome the dramas that motivated them to read popular literature start reading "high literature." They still sometimes read popular literature, but to a lesser extent, because they have found other methods to deal with their anxieties, so the world seems not as uncontrollable as it had seemed before they constructed their identities (Odden 149).

Although they are quite widely read in the whole world, detective stories seem to be particularly published and read in Anglo-Saxon countries, thus the

question arises as to what makes them so popular exactly in those countries. The famous detective fiction author, Dorothy L. Sayers, once noted: "Death in particular seems to provide the minds of the Anglo-Saxon race with a greater fund of innocent amusement than any other single subject" (qtd. in James 3). Since the English have always been attracted to horrors and crimes (Mandić 109), it is not surprising that they have created a genre such as detective fiction, and that it is so successful in England. According to Symons, "in a social sense, the detective story expresses in an extreme form the desire of the middle and upper classes in British society for a firm, almost hierarchical, social order, and for an efficient police force" (9). Similarly, James reports that in the Golden Age of detective fiction, the English believed in "a religious and moral code based on the Judeo-Christian inheritance," as well as in social and political institutions, which means that it was an ordered society unsympathetic to criminals (25) that provided a fertile ground for detective fiction. Furthermore, James refers to Auden's theory, and suggests that detective fiction is the most successful in Protestant countries. As many Protestants have no formal act of confession, they have a strong sense of guilt, and by reading detective stories, they deal with feelings of guilt, escaping to the "prelapsarian state of innocence" (52). Nicolas Blake likewise considers detective novels to be "an outlet for the sense of guilt" and compares them to a religious ritual, where the sin is murder and a high priest is the criminal who must be destroyed by a higher power – the detective (qtd. in Symons 9). This is comparable to Auden's view, for whom detective fiction is "a quasi-liturgical text" that celebrates community and represents "the ritual reenactment of a combination of confession, absolution, and scapegoating" (Stowe 574). Finally, Mandić quotes Fosca, who believes that the British have a scrupulous conscience, and that they only seem phlegmatic, but are actually nervous, so they want strong emotions, which they can experience in detective stories without real risk (116). It appears that all of these factors combined resulted in the emergence and popularity of detective fiction in Anglo-Saxon countries.

2. Structure and Conventions

2.1. Setting, Characters, Atmosphere

In general, detective stories have "a highly organised structure and recognised conventions" (James 5), which is one of the reasons why the readers are attracted to them. Agatha Christie begins many of her novels, including *Hercule*

Poirot's Christmas, by introducing the reader into the setting, the characters, their relationships, and the atmosphere of the novel.

She sets the story in the English countryside, where a closed rural community, in which all people know each other, is encountered. In this way, Christie enables the reader an entrance into "a familiar and reassuring world" in which crime is viewed as an aberration, and virtue as the norm (James 6). This world is fairly traditional: on the one hand, it appreciates moral values (righteousness, courage, loyalty, honesty), emotional values (friendship, love, forgiveness, faithfulness), and social values (professional moral and solidarity, respect for the law), and on the other hand, it condemns as evil the violation of the rules that apply to all members of the community, which is acceptable for all the communities in the world (Pavličić 12). According to James, in detective fiction, the fact that all reasonable people strive for good justifies that "we live in a rational, comprehensible and moral universe" (6). In order to restore social harmony, the perpetrator must be identified and punished.

Since Christie's plots are set in a closed community, there is a limited number of potential perpetrators, so it is possible for the readers to join the detective in the search for the culprit. James notes that spending a lot of time together results in irritation, which leads to violence (41–2), thereby explaining the high frequency of murders in rural communities. At the beginning of the novel, Christie presents all the characters in a few sentences and without "great psychological subtlety" (James 30) in a way that she lets the characters observe and assess each other either in their thoughts or in dialogues. For example, when Lee's granddaughter, Pilar, is mentioned for the first time, we see her through Stephen Farr's eyes:

> This girl was different. Black hair, rich creamy pallor – eyes with the depth and darkness of night in them. The sad proud eyes of the South. . . . It was all wrong that this girl should be sitting in this train among these dull, drab-looking people – all wrong that she should be going into the dreary midlands of England. She should have been on a balcony, a rose between her lips, a piece of black lace draping her proud head, and there should have been dust and heat and the smell of blood – the smell of the bull-ring – in the air… She should be somewhere splendid, not squeezed into the corner of a third-class carriage. (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas* 13)

Similarly, the personality traits of Simeon Lee are discussed by other characters. Namely, his daughter-in-law, Lydia, explains that he always expects to have his own way, while his son, David, reports about Simeon's love affairs and humiliation of his own late wife. Since Christie's characters belong to rich families or to the upper-middle class, and there is an ordered social hierarchy, she is considered politically conservative. In *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, the characters are members of the Lee family, whose paterfamilias got rich on diamonds in South Africa to such an extent that he is now a millionaire. Finally, in the opening chapters of her book, Christie presents an element of high significance for this kind of novel: she comments on "the uncanny atmosphere, on premonitions of evil, on warnings of doom" (York 17), for instance, when Lydia assures her husband that evil exists and can be sensed in Simeon's house. There are also numerous insinuations that a murder will occur; namely, Christie overemphasizes the fact that the Lees are vindictive, and the old Lee provokes his heirs by letting his lawyer know that he would like to change his will, only to be told by his daughter-in-law that she is afraid for him. Pilar tells her grandfather that God says, "*Take what you like and pay for it*," whereupon she asks him whether he had paid for what he had taken (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas* 67). Finally, the whole family acts strangely that evening, which culminates with Simeon's son playing the "Dead March."

2.2. Crime

People have always been eager to read about crime, either in detective novels or in newspaper articles, so crime-related literature has always sold well. According to Pavličić, every human being is interested in dark and destructive matters, but in a way that we do not like horrible things happening to us, but instead to other people. We like to see the horror while being protected from it, and in detective stories, the narrator serves this purpose: he knows what is going to happen, ensures us that the outcome will be satisfactory, and convinces us that the story is fictional. Justice must win in the end to protect us from the horror and danger, i.e. to convince us that we are indeed safe (Pavličić 190). Although evil both attracts and puts us off, we are not on the side of the criminal because he is a phantom, and the unknown is always repulsive to people (Pavličić 204). Thus, we are on Poirot's side in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, and want him to discover the culprit. The crime is usually a murder because precisely this crime "carries an atavistic weight of repugnance, fascination and fear" (James 5). It is also the ultimate crime because a person cannot be revived, which makes murder the most thrilling crime.

As the core of detective novels, crime is the element that provides the readers with the pleasure of solving puzzles. Puzzles have always intrigued people; therefore, Mandić believes that we "have an intellectual urge to solve puzzles," and the most puzzling of all is – crime (29, translation mine). Since reading detective fiction is like "an intellectual game," it must comply with certain rules, so that the reader can participate in solving the puzzle (Žmegač 199). Therefore, the London Detection Club, of which Christie was a member, had fair play standards; for example, the criminal must be mentioned early in the story, there can be only one secret room or passage, the detective cannot commit the crime, etc. James offers an excellent comparison between the readers and Scheherazade's husband – we are also eager to discover what happens next, i.e. what the next page brings, so it is very difficult to put down a book and then continue reading it after a while (52), especially because we need to memorize many details in order to be able to investigate the crime together with the detective.

Christie's murders are fascinating and until the very end appear to be perfect crimes. In *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, cracks and bumps, followed by a horrible scream, are suddenly heard from Simeon Lee's room. His family, however, finds the room locked from the inside. When they break the door down, Simeon is murdered, there is nobody in the room, and no weapon is found. It is even impossible that the culprit escaped through the window. Taking everything into consideration, the murder seems impossible, so Colonel Johnson asks: "Do you mean to tell me . . . that this is one of those damned cases you get in detective stories where a man is killed in a locked room by some apparently supernatural agency?" (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas* 113),[1] probably alluding to Poe, whose literary legacy includes the locked room mystery, among other conventions (Burnsdale 3). However, the fact that catches the eye is that there is too much blood in the room, and that the old man was too weak to defend himself so aggressively that even massive furniture was overturned. Poirot points out that this is a crime of blood: "*It is Simeon Lee's own blood that rises up against him*" (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas* 315), while York sees the excessive blood as a symbol of Simeon's excessive desires of the body, because of which his illegitimate son kills him (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas* 17). Besides, a small wooden object and a piece of rubber are found on the ground, and there is evidence that someone

[1] According to Cook, "the locked room mystery is a form which not only gives the fullest expression to the elements of closure and enclosure, but allows the greatest possible impact of ratiocination on a plot as perplexing, seemingly impossible, as it is absurd" (6).

locked the door from the outside using some kind of tool. If the killer wanted the murder to appear as a suicide, it is unclear why he locked the door, left no weapon, and did not clear the mess. The situation is more complicated by the fact that Lee had called Superintendent Sugden that evening because his diamonds were stolen. In other words, it is not clear how the murder was executed, what the motive was, who had an opportunity to kill the old man, and who, after all, is the culprit. The case is presented as an intriguing puzzle both for the detective and the reader, who, according to the commandments of the London Detection Club, has access to all clues (Haycraft 226).

2.3. The Detective

Another key element of a detective story is naturally the detective. Detectives in this genre should be unusual and interesting, so that we easily remember them, like them, become attached to them, feel the joy of recognition when we encounter their eccentric habits in the next novel, but also are able to identify with them (Pavličić 68–9). Burnsdale reveals that the readers are mostly loyal to their favorite detective (XV), while James compares this phenomenon with "meeting old friends" (32). Christie created one of the most famous detectives of all times – Hercule Poirot, who is the embodiment of what an ideal fictional detective should be. As Haycraft rightfully argues, the character of a sleuth is "in distinctive need of a personality" (232), and Christie succeeds in providing Poirot with a unique personality, so the result is "a successful . . . example of the humorous detective" (Haycraft 67). Poirot continues Sherlock Holmes' legacy in respect of deductive powers and peculiarities (cf. Burnsdale 5). *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* is the twentieth book featuring Poirot, and in each Christie has given numerous descriptions of his peculiarities. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Poirot is depicted as a little Belgian that resembles a cat (236) and has "[a]n egg-shaped head, partially covered with suspiciously black hair, two immense mustaches, . . . a pair of [green] watchful eyes" (24). He is otherwise a very tidy perfectionist with a great sense for fashion and beauty, and a big fan of central heating (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas*). In addition, because of Poirot's supposed difficulty with English, he does not seem very intelligent, which results in the suspects' underestimation of him. Professionally, Poirot is a private detective whose job is "[t]he study of human nature" (*Roger Ackroyd* 26), since he claims that "[t]he character of the victim has always something to do with his or her murder" (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas* 152). For this reason, he stays in the house of the murdered Simeon Lee to learn more information through informal

conversation with the household members. He uses his intellect to identify the murderer, which means that his method consists of logical deduction from the presented evidence:

> The essence of Poirot's method is to reveal all the little details of the case, however seemingly irrelevant, personal, or emotional in nature. When all is known, as indeed it can be, common-sense popular psychology and such scientific terms as complexes, paranoia, and fixation are used to provide the reader with a comprehensible explanation for motivation and action. (Walton 60).

In this way, Poirot realizes that the majority of the Lee family members had a motive and an opportunity to kill Simeon Lee. As always, everybody is a potential suspect, while the culprit turns out to be the least likely person. For instance, George Lee did not like his father, who threatened to reduce his allowance on the day of his death. He also had an opportunity to do it after telephoning, which was his alibi. George's wife is in debt, and she has no alibi. David Lee still resents his father for mistreating his mother, and Poirot raises the possibility of his wife lying for him to provide an alibi, etc. In brief, every family member is a suspect. However, Poirot warns that to find a murderer, the character traits of Simeon Lee should be observed. He deduces that he left his children pride, patience, and appearance, so based on that, he tries to conclude which family member is a potential murderer, and singles out Alfred and Hilda Lee. After that, he examines the circumstances of the crime; at first nothing makes sense, but Poirot comes to the conclusion that Simeon was killed by one of his illegitimate sons – Superintendent Sugden. Since Sugden was conducting the investigation with Poirot, and there was no explicit connection between him and the victim, he was indeed the least likely killer. Realizing that Sugden is the spitting image of the old Lee, Poirot presumes that he resented his father for the wrong he did to him, and thus decided to take revenge, which is one of the traditional motives[2] in detective stories. In the first place, Sugden called his father because of an alleged attempted theft of diamonds in order to have an excuse to enter the house and Simeon's room. When he cut his father's throat, he piled up the furniture, put a rope around it, let it hang down the window, and turned the key from

[2] According to Walton, "[t]raditional reasonable motives include financial gain, revenge, an escape from black-mail, and sexual or familial jealousies" (60). Similarly, Haycraft reports that "[r]evenge, jealousy, ambition, passion, are all motives which seem . . . suited to the nature of crime" (252–23).

the outside. Then, to put suspicion on the members of the Lee family, he hid in the garden the diamonds he stole from the old man, and afterwards pulled the cord so that the piled-up furniture crashes, and the bladder called "Dying Pig" produces a scream. Poirot finally remarks on the deductive process of his reasoning: "You see now how everything fits in? The improbable struggle, *which is necessary to establish a false time of death*; the locked door – so that nobody shall find the body too soon; the dying man's scream. The crime is now logical and reasonable" (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas* 325). Furthermore, Poirot is generally led by the rule that everybody could be lying; in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, he says that everybody lies in parts (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas* 179). Having that in mind and noticing all the details, he concludes that two of Lee's illegitimate sons were in the house on the evening of the murder – the afore-mentioned Superintendent Sugden and the alleged Stephen Farr. What is more, he even deduces that the girl claiming to be Pilar is lying because Pilar's parents had blue eyes, so according to the laws of inheritance, she could not be brown-eyed. Finally, we find out in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* that Poirot does not solve cases for money. Instead, York explains that his motivation is the following: he "detects out of professionalism, boredom, a liking for sport, wish to clear the innocent, curiosity, and love of truth" (87). As has been said, Poirot is an eccentric sleuth, following Holmes' tradition, who successfully solves murder cases using his extraordinary detective powers. Fictional detectives in general, including Poirot, are, according to Škreb, intellectually godlike:

> Unlimited faith in the power of intelligence, as it is embodied in the detective, creates a feeling of security and protection from storms . . . within a civilized . . . society. The foundation of the detective fiction myth is the faith in a being with godlike, and certainly superhuman traits, in the omniscience, the omnipotence, and the omnipresence of the detective. (Schneider qtd. in Škreb 216, translation mine)

When we read Christie's novels, we indeed get the impression that Poirot is a being with supernatural intellectual abilities who will solve even the most complicated cases using only his intellect.

2.4. Happy Ending

A detective story typically has a happy ending; according to Rowland, by identifying the murderer, both moral and social order is restored (39). Similarly, in Burnsdale's words, the alluring attraction of detective stories lies in "pro-

found human desires: to replace chaos with order, to see that evil is punished, and to probe the mystery of wickedness in the hope of understanding it" (XIV). In *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, this is achieved not only by untangling the complex mystery of Simeon Lee's murder but also by revealing the true identities of Pilar, Stephen Farr, and the murderer, Superintendent Sugden. The following conversation between Lydia and Alfred is a wonderful illustration of every Hercule Poirot's story, including this one: "'You know, it was really amazing the way everything fell into place when he [Hercule Poirot] explained it.' 'I know. Like when you finish a jig-saw puzzle and all the queer-shaped bits you swear won't fit in anywhere find their places quite naturally.'" (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas* 333). Apart from that, the identification of the culprit is followed by the announcement of marriage between the former suspects, Pilar and Stephen. As Walton explains, in Christie's novels, a marriage between young and attractive former suspects "often completes the mood of resolution" (51). Moreover, Harry and Alfred are reconciled, and the former moves to Hawaii, since he always wanted to live there but did not have enough money. David finally decides to break with the past, and Alfred and Lydia are going to sell the old man's house and finally be free. In brief, the end of the novel offers a future punishment of the culprit, a happy ending as well as the sense of relief for former suspects, and the feeling of satisfaction and pride for the detective.

For the most part, Christie obeys the fair play standards of the London Detection Club, which is supposed to make the task easier for the readers: "the criminal had to be mentioned early in the story; the supernatural was ruled out; and the detective could not commit the crime, rely on intuition, or receive help accidentally" (Burnsdale 9). Poirot, nevertheless, relies heavily on intuition: he "claims to be able to read suspects' minds by observing unconscious tics, slips and body language" (Walton 58), based on which he develops his theories. This might be one of the reasons why it is so difficult for a reader to solve Christie's mysteries as easily as Poirot does.

Despite the inability to solve the crime by themselves, while reading this novel, the readers escape for a while both the hardships and dullness of everyday life by immersing themselves into a thinking process with the purpose of a search for the truth who killed Simeon Lee and how he or she managed to do it. In spite of mostly not being successful in solving the mystery by themselves, they enjoy the process of thinking and reading about what really happened. In the end, they feel deep satisfaction because everything falls into its place, and

order is restored when Christie offers a rational solution for all the mysteries she presented in the novel.

Conclusion

Detective fiction attracts a certain type of people. They are contemplatives who value the process of thinking and the search for truth. Detective fiction is predominantly read in the most difficult times, so it is considered to be escapist literature. However, it provides an escape both from life's difficulties and boredom of everyday life. The readers escape to the fictional world of detective fiction when they are faced with stress, and thereby reenact their childhood dramas. This genre is mostly written and read in Anglo-Saxon countries because the English are interested in horror and crimes, they believe in the hierarchical social order and institutions, they like to experience strong emotions in a safe environment, and, as many Protestants have no formal act of confession, they have a strong sense of guilt, and detective fiction helps them deal with this feeling.

Readers are also fond of detective fiction because it has an organized structure and established conventions, which is noticeable on the example of *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*. Firstly, Christie introduces the story by describing the setting, the characters, their relationships, and the atmosphere. Her stories are mostly set in the countryside, her characterization is never detailed, and she creates an uncanny atmosphere by emphasizing the presence of evil and making insinuations that somebody will be murdered. Secondly, the crime is generally a murder, and Christie's murders are both fascinating and seemingly impossible – like that of an old man covered with too much blood lying in a locked room. Thirdly, one of the most important elements of a detective story is certainly the detective. Christie created one of the most famous and original detectives – Hercule Poirot. Like Sherlock Holmes, he is eccentric with respect to his looks and personality, and he uses deductive powers (his "little gray cells") to solve crimes. Finally, the murderer is identified and will be punished, so that order is restored, and everything fits into place after all the inexplicable facts are clarified. Even the former suspects have their own happy ends: some marry and the others are going to begin the lives they always hoped for. Generally, Christie mainly obeys the fair play standards of the London Detection Club, but nevertheless succeeds in deceiving her readers every time. However, we are still attracted by her puzzles, by the triumph of good over evil, by the familiar world of cozy English villages, and by the eccentric, but widely admired sleuth – Hercule Poirot.

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KONVENCIJE DETEKTIVSKE FIKCIJE ILI ZAŠTO VOLIMO DETEKTIVSKE ROMANE: *BOŽIĆ HERCULEA POIROTA*

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Detektivska fikcija već je desetljećima iznimno popularna među čitateljima. Ovaj rad odgovara na pitanja tko su čitatelji toga žanra i što ih to privlači detektivskim pričama. U prvom dijelu ovoga rada nudi se objašnjenje kako su kontemplativci osobito privrženi detektivskoj fikciji, koja se čita kao eskapistička književnost, i zašto je ona posebno popularna na anglosaksonskom području. U drugom dijelu ovoga rada korišten je roman Agathe Christie *Božić Herculea Poirota* kao primjer organizirane strukture i uspostavljenih konvencija detektivske fikcije koji taj žanr čine tako privlačnim, a uključuju mjesto radnje, karakterizaciju likova, zločin, detektiva i obnovljeni poredak, odnosno sretan kraj.

Ključne riječi: detektivska fikcija, konvencije, Agatha Christie, *Božić Herculea Poirota*